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ABSTRACT

The recent acceleration of mothers' participation in the workplace has transformed the lives of millions of wives, husbands, and children, and has created an urgent need for strategies to assist families with two working parents. Dual career couples, especially those with young children, frequently feel overwhelmed by their lifestyle. The external demands of the workplace, children's needs, and household responsibilities compete for limited time, creating obvious stress on the dual career couple. These external stresses may be compounded by internal feelings of guilt, anxiety, alienation, powerlessness, rigidity, anger, and competition. There are four factors that dual career couples can become aware of which will help them become more stress resistant: (1) commitment; (2) control; (3) confidence; and (4) cooperation. Couples high in these characteristics are probably more successful and satisfied, and success and satisfaction with this lifestyle strengthens commitment, control, confidence, and cooperation. The relationship appears to be reciprocal. Although career and family involvement are not easily combined, given the demands of today's competitive, inflexible workplace and the scarcity of childcare resources, a balance can be achieved and couples can find satisfaction in the combination of family and career roles. (NB)

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Dual Career Couples: Helping Them Have It All

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1987

The American family is clearly in a time of transition. The traditional family with the sole-breadwinner father and the "at home" mother is rapidly vanishing; it is estimated that by 1990, only 14% of American households will live in this family pattern. Between 1960 and 1985, there was a 256% increase in the number of working mothers with children under the age of six. In the U.S. today, 63% of all new mothers return to work within the first six months. This skyrocketing acceleration of mothers' participation in the workplace has transformed the lives of millions of wives, husbands, and children.

These dramatic changes have created an urgent need for strategies to assist families with two working parents. Although eventually broad institutional reforms may help to address the new problems of these families more fully, for the time being most individuals pursuing this lifestyle are eager to learn how to cope more effectively with various common sources of conflict. As psychologists and educators, we're very interested in helping these families explore the rich potential of their chosen lifestyle. Today, we'd like to focus especially on a relatively elite, highly educated group of parents, who are striving to balance dual commitments to family and the workplace, and share some approaches that seem to help these dual career couples "have it all".

Most of our lives are being touched, directly or indirectly, by this growing trend. You yourself might be part of a dual career couple, or perhaps your grown children are pursuing this lifestyle. Your neighbors and colleagues at work almost certainly include examples. You might want to help associates and employees make this lifestyle work better for them, so that in turn they can contribute more optimally to the workplace. Your clients are almost certainly seeking help with their two-worker family lifestyle. Helping them requires an understanding of their conflicts and stressors, and the application of appropriately conceived interventions.

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The dual career family has been of great interest to us, both personally and professionally. In our work as clinical psychologists, the majority of our clients are struggling in one way or another with this social trend...either struggling to make their own two worker household function more smoothly, or struggling to affirm and validate their decision to pursue a traditional marriage where the wife does not work outside the home. Based on a combination of research and clinical findings, we've identified some key issues which we find very helpful in working with dual career couples. Let us briefly summarize what we've found.

Dual career couples, especially those with young children, frequently feel overwhelmed by their lifestyle. It's helpful to clarify the two general sources of their distress.

External and Internal Sources of Difficulty

The external demands of the workplace, children's needs, and household responsibilities compete for limited time, creating obvious stress on the dual career couple. In a national survey of workers, 35% of the men and women said that family life and job interfere with each other somewhat or a lot (Crosby 1982). Men complain of overwork and limited leisure time, women of scheduling problems and exhaustion.

Although these external sources of difficulty are certainly real, I think it is important to realize that they are compounded by equally problematic internal, psychological sources of difficulty. Guilt, anxiety, alienation, powerlessness, rigidity, anger, and competition are common obstacles to success and satisfaction for dual career couples. The fact that these internal barriers are usually present to one degree or another should not be surprising; today's generation of dual career partners was socialized to accept traditional roles, lack the benefit of successful role models, and find themselves embedded in a social context which is often critical of and challenging toward their dual career lifestyle. No wonder internal conflict is the rule! For many, these internal issues preclude solutions to the pressing external problems; internal conflicts make people more vulnerable to stress and less efficient in solving problems.

In practice, we have found that the external and internal sources of difficulty are mutually exacerbating, because failure to cope with external demands reinforces the internal problems. As a result, improvement requires changing this ongoing interplay between the external and internal problems. To do this, it's crucial for couples to address both sources of difficulty. In treatment, for example, it's often necessary to provide concrete suggestions on how to meet external demands more successfully, and to assist couples in solving specific problems, before the internal issues can be fully addressed.

In the short run this is often needed to keep the family intact; it helps to "buy time" to work on the internal barriers. However, for long term satisfaction with this lifestyle, it is imperative to address the central internal, psychological obstacles.

What Helps Couples Have It All
The Four C's: Correlates of Success

In our work with dual career couples, we've discovered that certain common elements characterize the most successful relationships and seem to contribute to a couple's hardiness or ability to cope with a high level of external stressors. Those that are able to negotiate the dual career lifestyle successfully have much in common with a highly stress resistant group of male executives studied by Suzanne Kobasa in the 70's, who did not develop the physical health problems usually associated with their high level of external stress. They also display several qualities that Robert and Marilyn Kriegel have found to be associated with workplace and athletic success.

Considering the four factors that characterize successful dual career couples provides a framework for helping other couples cope more effectively. Making couples aware of these four factors can help them become more stress resistant.

Commitment
Control
Confidence
Cooperation

1. Commitment: A high level of commitment to an egalitarian, dual career lifestyle helps successful couples cope with stress. Another way of putting this is that the most successful couples are able to "have it all" because they really WANT it all in the first place! They both value their involvement in the workplace and they both value their family life. They have a fairly clear view of the longterm distribution of rights and responsibilities which they want to characterize their relationship, and are able to weather shortterm storms more easily as a result. They are realistic about their alternatives, and resist the tendency to succumb to romanticized images of traditional marital roles (they avoid comparing their actual, real life with its real frustrations with a fantasy ideal). They have considered the values assumptions which underlie their lifestyle preferences.

The greatest obstacles to this necessary commitment derive from prevalent critical and challenging social attitudes. Three sets of assumptions are particularly threatening:
1. Dual career couples are harming their children
2. Career women are placing themselves in psychological &/or physical jeopardy

3. Dual career husbands are burdened and deprived

Dual career couples frequently feel defensive because of these widespread negative conceptualizations. Popular myths about the harmfulness of the dual career lifestyle foster maladaptive guilt, anxiety, alienation, and anger. Examining each set of myths in light of the relevant objective evidence helps dual career couples resolve their ambivalence and make a stronger commitment.

1. The kids. Many dual career partners have an extremely difficult time with the popular belief that their lifestyle compromises their children's well being. Although most objective developmental research strongly counters prevailing negative attitudes toward maternal employment, showing few differences between children whose mothers are employed and those who are unemployed, and some which actually show the advantages of having a mother who works outside the home, the public views working mothers as harmful to their children. This misconception must be corrected if couples are to resolve their ambivalence about pursuing a dual career lifestyle.

A 1986 study on 699 families with children in grades 1, 3, & 5 found that children with employed mothers scored higher on IQ tests and were rated higher by teachers on academic achievement. They appeared more verbally fluent, more autonomous, and better behaved in school. It seems likely that women who feel good about themselves come closer to doing their best as mothers. A rewarding job enhances self esteem, which in turn enhances parenting.

Working mothers provide positive role models for their children. Their daughters tend to be more ambitious and confident. The fact that wives with careers frequently have chosen to continue working after becoming mothers helps to blur the distinction between work and play. In easing this separation, they redress years of compartmentalization in living created by industrialization. These mothers portray work positively, as something which is exciting, stimulating, enriching, challenging, and even fun! What a lesson for children to learn.

In short, children in dual career families aren't being deprived! In fact, a recent study by United Media Enterprises found that dual career parents are more likely to read and draw with their children on a regular basis, are more likely to supervise schoolwork, take them to special events, and talk to them about school and friends. Furthermore, use of child care helps to teach children how to use a broader, varied support system.

2. The women. Working mothers are often viewed with suspicion by employers who assume their loyalties will be divided between job and family and that performance will

suffer as a result. Actually, an employee's performance at work may actually be enhanced by her participation in multiple roles. Although task specialization and division of labor may foster shortterm increases in efficiency and productivity, as the auto industry painfully learned, it has its price in terms of longterm increased worker boredom, alienation, and dissatisfaction, all of which translate to reduced productivity. For many women, the mix of roles is refreshing and energizing. Many career women report improved efficiency, heightened self confidence, and a liberating sense of independence in the workplace after having children. They become less maladaptively perfectionistic, better organized, and more willing to take constructive risks than before they were involved with multiple roles.

Some worry about the psychological and physical effects of "role strain". However, research has overwhelmingly confirmed the health benefits (to both sexes) of having two roles instead of one. Dual career partners each have two sources of self esteem. Research indicates that working mothers show greater psychological wellbeing; for most employed wives, the psychological protection of having two roles compensates for the extra obligations, and contentment at work is positively associated with contentment at home. Increasingly it is being recognized that multiple roles are psychologically protective and mutually enhancing. The notion of "role strain" is even fading from the sociological lexicon!

Wives with careers also need to consider the heavy psychological price of not working outside the home. Because their work in the home is currently accorded little status or respect, women who stay at home often suffer low self esteem. They are more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and usually weild less power in their marriages. Staying at home usually affects the type of job a woman will have once the children are grown and she returns to the workplace. Since most women today can expect to work about 35 years, electing to stay at home while children are young entails a substantial eventual sacrifice in the workplace, in terms of both salary and prestige. Women who take themselves out of the workplace run the risk of becoming displaced homemakers in the event of divorce. This role is one characterized by the "triple jeopardy" of needing to seek employment with age, being female, and being seen as inexperienced all working against the effort. A review of the evidence will make it easier to remain committed to the dual career alternative.

3. The men. Dual career couples are burdened by restrictive traditional definitions of masculinity, which fail to acknowledge or value men's capacity to nurture. Traditional American fathers were shown in the early 70's to spend on average only 12 minutes a day with their children! Men today are reporting more involvement with their families and

greater psychological well-being and happiness from their families than from work. The greater a man's participation in his family life (from doing chores to child care) the more competent and involved he feels as a father, and the less sex-stereotyped his children (especially sons). Studies suggest that father-reared infants actually outperform mother-reared infants on some tasks, challenging the belief that fathers are less effective with babies.

Furthermore, the stress associated with retirement will probably be less burdensome for highly participative fathers, who will continue to enjoy the emotional closeness they have developed with their children.

It is interesting to consider that dual career couples may paradoxically make it easier on traditional role couples. These couples are discovering all the "invisible" work stay-at-home mothers did, and are seeing that much of it is very necessary. In addition, as men nurture more, nurturing may become more valued (cross culturally, men's work is more highly valued), making wives that stay at home more respected!

Dual career couples seem to have an easier time maintaining their commitment when they switch from evaluating and judging themselves to describing and accepting themselves. This makes it easier to take responsibility for life. Successful couples need to emphasize the various BENEFITS, rather than the COSTS of combining career and family. The successful couples' ability to accept and enthusiastically embrace their shared lifestyle choice is consistent with a second characteristic, control.

2. Control: Successful dual career partners assume a high degree of personal responsibility and recognize the choices they make. They perceive outcomes as resulting from their own actions, abilities, and effort. They avoid externalizing their problems, don't blame the world for their problems, and avoid becoming mired in a spiral of mutual blaming within the marriage.

Acceptance of the need for ongoing planning and specific, realistic goal setting is important for couples who are striving to feel in control. Deciding in advance which role to emphasize in cases of conflicting demands is important. For some people, learning how to compartmentalize their roles helps to keep work and family distinct and reduces stress. An assertive behavioral style, and an avoidance of procrastination, is also advantageous. Both seem to be facilitated when couples challenge the notion that they must be "perfect".

In order to maintain an optimal sense of mastery, dual career couples need to remind themselves of their options. It is particularly important for them to assume an active

role in choosing definitions of personal success; developing their own internal performance standards is critical to the balancing act they wish to perform. An acceptance of the need for compromises, flexibility, and the shedding of dispensible "obligations" is necessary. They shouldn't automatically and passively accept the outside world's often questionable definitions of success (regarding performance in both the parenting and working spheres), because such definitions are often self-defeating for them (assuming as these definitions do the traditional division of labor in marriage that allows unilateral devotion to home or job). Consciously making some concessions in defining "having it all" allows dual career couples the satisfactions of at least having SOME of it all. Helping clients to clarify their values and priorities can be very beneficial. Helping them to recognize that their priorities will shift at different times in their family's life can also yield a broader, more flexible perspective.

Developing these internal standards isn't easy for dual career couples, in part because they tend to have a history of success in fulfilling external expectations (such as those in the workplace...that's part of why the women want to continue working!) which can actually make it harder on them to stop using external sources of approval as a yardstick.

3. Confidence: Individuals within successful dual career couples perceive themselves as generally competent, and are not inordinately threatened by the need to make changes. They are able to remain flexible, can tolerate taking risks, and try to see unexpected demands as challenges to growth rather than as threats to security. They work to interpret changes as exhilarating opportunities for discovery and don't overvalue sameness and predictability.

Sustained involvement with multiple roles is often associated with improved self esteem and feelings of competence. A couple's tolerance for change can also be fostered by their conscious development of connections to their community. Building a support system to help buffer the effects of unexpected changes is especially important because dual career couples tend to live far from their families of origin (in part because career pursuit often requires mobility). This makes the need for a "surrogate" family important.

Reassuring dual career partners that their needs for social support don't represent "weakness" or "failure" can help mobilize appropriate action. Providing this permission for dependence is often important with these clients, because they tend to value autonomy highly and fear implied threats to their independence. The fact that their relaince on child care providers does indeed often make them more dependent on others than they are accustomed to being, frequently makes

dependency needs and counterdependence important therapeutic issues.

4. Cooperation: Successful dual career couples show a high level of mutual trust and respect. They view their relationship as a democratic alliance and value fairness and shared power. They emphasize mutual objectives, regularly reaffirm shared life goals, and avoid competition within the marriage. These dual career folks don't DUEL! Instead, they recognize the need for open, unguarded communication. In sharing responsibilities, they are flexible and make accomodating individual strengths and preferences a priority. They value sexual intimacy, and make a conscious effort to reserve time for nurturing their relationship.

Probably the biggest obstacle here involves partners' tendencies to displace their anger onto their spouses when they become frustrated with their demanding lifestyle. Learning how to recognize and label this process often is immensely helpful. These couples actually have an advantage; the fact that they are both involved in both the job and home arena can facilitate mutual understanding and enhance tolerance for irritability following an especially "bad day" at home or work.

Future Research

One obvious shortcoming of the work done thusfar in this area stems from its correlational nature. It is possible that the four internal characteristics associated with successful couples are the result of their effective management of a highly stressful lifestyle, rather than contributory precursors of success. Work that is currently in progress will help to assess the direction of causality. Our hypothesis at this point is that the true relationship isreciprocal; couples high in the four C's are probably more successful and satisfied, and success and satisfaction with this lifestyle strengthen commitment, control, confidence, and cooperation.

Conclusion

The first examples of dual career couples, studied in the 70's, typically conformed to traditional sex roles within the family. Husbands felt terrific about "allowing" their wives to work, but made few or no concessions in their own careers or in their contributions to household and family tasks.

In the 80's, it seems that more couples would like a more truly egalitarian lifestyle, one in which both husband and wife, each equally committed to family and work - aspire to integrate their two roles (parent and worker)... to view family and work as complementary, rather than adversarial segments of life experience.

Career and family involvement aren't easily combined, given the demands of today's competitive, inflexible workplace and the scarcity of childcare resources and the like, but with some effort, we think balance can be achieved... partners can sample the rich satisfactions of simultaneous involvement in nurturing and producing... and couples can come closer to having it all!